

WRITING WITH PHOTOGRAPHS, RE-CONSTRUCTING SELF: AN ARTS-BASED  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

DISSERTATION

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By

Anniina Suominen, M.A.

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Patricia L. Stuhr, Adviser

Dr. Terry Barrett

Dr. Julia Watson

Approved by

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Adviser

Department of Art Education

*I needed to pause and listen to the voices and wisdom of women.*

*Áidilleni, to my mother*

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My story is about the struggle of learning to speak,  
my story is about learning to write (in any language),  
my story is about becoming an adult,  
my story is about the difficult process of separating my identity  
from that of my family.  
It is about struggling to live in two different time zones, with two languages,  
two or a thousand ways of viewing the world as a place  
that belongs to “us” –as a political, authored, understood, theorized  
physical and social experience.

Photograph 1

## CHAPTER 1

### WRITING WITH PHOTOGRAPHS, WRITING THE SELF: Using Artistic Methods in the Investigation of Individual Cultural Identity

My dissertation is an arts-based autoethnographic study which investigates my growth in academia and my adjustment to a foreign culture and social system. By studying my life on a personal level through the artistic research process that involves photographing my life and creative writing, I have gained a deeper, more complex understanding of the changes in my self-perception and social identity caused by the life-altering cultural adaptation process, as well as how the different, interwoven life aspects affect my teaching and academic decision-making. This process has been an active re-creation of self, an attempt to understand these changes in self-perception and to create new representation of self informed by the study. My research focuses on a three-year period starting with my move from Helsinki, Finland, to Columbus, Ohio. Throughout the written artifact, I wish to demonstrate how I came to critically re-evaluate, through local, personal and visual methods of inquiry, the methods we use to study identity and cultural production, as well as how we approach diversity education.

I believe that people create an understanding of who they are through reflecting on the stories they tell and the images and other documents created about their lives. I believe that all the research we do, and all the academic texts we publish, also change our understanding of who we are (Richardson, 1997). Conducting research is an active form of self-(re)creation, thus I find it important to seek methods of research that best express the researcher's intentions and epistemological understanding. For that reason I begin this study by telling my personal story.

I grew up in an artistically oriented family and I received my previous degrees at the University of Art and Design Helsinki in Finland, which strongly emphasizes the development of students' individual artistic identities. While artists are trained to be deeply involved in the process of inquiry emotionally and through bodily experiences, scholarly and scientific modes of cultural and social research often separate the body, senses and emotions from the process of inquiry and devalue forms of knowledge construction other than logic (Pink, 2001). In my dissertation I have attempted to approach the process intuitively, respecting and listening to all aspects of myself.

My main theoretical interest is the intersection of artistic/creative behavior and systematic qualitative research practices. Through my study, I provide a rich description and critical analysis of the involvement of alternative and artistic methods in the process of studying identity construction. While many art educators have shifted their curriculum towards teaching about life in its multiplicity through the critical study of art and visual culture and several scholars have shown innovative interest in studying humanity through art and creative behavior, I believe that we need to continue critically re-evaluating the methods we use to study art, visual cognition, and identity construction. I am looking for an alternative approach; my research further develops the relatively new methodologies of arts-based inquiry and autoethnography by providing an example of how identity can be critically studied in the context of an increasingly diverse society through local, personal and artistic experiences and critical self-reflective methods.

In my dissertation work I have positioned myself through different components of my identity “in relation to the great traditions, be these epistemic structures, the signification of specific location and its national/cultural identification or gendered narratives and histories” (Rogoff, 2000, p. 123) that have formed my self-perception. My life and story began reshaping as I relocated to a new social and cultural context at The Ohio State University. I found this change liberating as the new environment allowed partial re-creation of identity and helped me to question the individual I had assumed I was. My study focuses on the first three years of my life in Columbus, Ohio. However, I soon found myself delving into layers of family history to understand how it was that, even before I was born, events took place that influenced who I assumed I was. Although I had found this change in living conditions and cultural environment helpful in

questioning my socially learned and adopted identity, I found myself “sliding” back to my old behavioral patterns and daily routines. These conditions needed to be investigated when I was re-writing my identity. In this process I needed to apply different theoretical and conceptual frameworks to approach the concept of identity construction. While my writing relates to many contemporary social and cultural phenomena, I am mainly writing myself into the map or genre of writing and representation. According to Carol B. Stack (1993) in her article “Writing Ethnography: Feminist Critical Practice,” “the goal is to explore and experiment – to learn and write as much about our understanding of how we locate our voice[s] in our writing as possible” (p. 81).

### Photography and Visual Inquiry

In my investigation of my fragmented sense of “self” my camera has been my faithful guide dog and ally. This process would have been impossible without this mechanical apparatus. For a visual story to be born requires a special moment and privacy. I react to my own visuality through the camera while photographing and while looking at the proof sheets; these images trouble me, please me, and touch my emotions and feelings. The photographs that I choose to further work with are the ones that seem willing to have a conversation with me, or the ones that require immediate attention. Through my camera I see the world differently; it limits, crops, selects and guides seeing.

If we could learn new ways of using our cameras we could start by telling our own stories in different ways. Initially we could use the camera for a dialogue with ourselves, as in photo therapy, to de-censorize ourselves, or as a type of visual diary-writing. Once we feel it is safe to proceed we can share our ‘new’ stories with allies, and we can begin to re-imag(in)e who we are, both visually and verbally. If we were encouraged to do this as children, who knows what we might begin to make of the world by the time we became adults? (Spence, 1988, p. 214).

My aim in this study is to further develop the relatively new methodologies of arts-based research and autoethnography and advance our understanding of the possible roles and uses of visuals in qualitative research. I have investigated the meanings of visual images for research, both independently and in conjunction with texts. I believe it is possible to transmit information through art that would be impossible to verbalize and arrange according to verbal cognitive patterns. I believe that images and visual understandings themselves are knowledge that does not need to be translated into any other form of knowledge, thus I have examined images as data, as sources of information for investigation; as a medium

for analysis for the researcher; and as an alternative form of representation in qualitative inquiry. While my approach to studying identity construction is visually informed and oriented, as well as characteristically autobiographical, the guiding principles and some of the methods I have modified for my study could be further altered for other artistic mediums /self-reflexive methods.

### Writing, Texts, and Visuals

Although my abilities to communicate in English and to use theoretical texts to support my narrative have improved since I began using English in everyday communication three and a half years ago, I hope that a sometimes naive tone and a partially limited vocabulary available to “newcomers” in this social context are still present in my text. While my work is more evidently informed by multiple social and cultural positions, it is also sensitive to multilingualism (Ong, 1995). The Finnish language, for example, does not recognize gender positions of objects and subjects, but the subject’s gender is understood from the context. While this does not mean that the Finnish language is not gendered, it is easier to create (an illusion of) a gender-neutral text when distinctions between “he” and “she” do not need to be made. Also words are often lengthy due to the frequent use of compound words. This encourages the creation of new words and allows for the alteration of the tone of the text through slight variations of word form.

The founding idea of my study is to learn more about the process of identity construction. One naturally desires positionality and the sense of security provided by a feeling of belonging within the intricate structures of everyday life as well as within the academy. One of the ways belonging could be understood is “the ability to live out complex and reflexive identities which acknowledge language, knowledge, gender and race as modes of self-positioning” (Rogoff, 2000, p. 13). We read texts and visuals from our contemporary perspectives, bringing personal desires and needs into reading (Kuhn, 1995). Through this ‘reading’, and the interpretation of the information, Irit Rogoff (2000) suggests that we “fragment, appropriate, rewrite and utterly transform those texts” while these visuals and texts simultaneously change and mold our understanding of culture and our place within it; visuals and texts “constitute us rather than being subjected to historical readings by us” (p. 9). According to Rogoff by constantly asking oneself the question ‘Where do I belong?’ and pursuing the articulation of this question in relationship to one’s life brings awareness to the process of self-positioning, in-flux identity and the



complex process of writing one's self into culture. For the past three and a half years my studies have focused around the questions, "*Who am I?*" and "*How is my culturally informed identity and self-perception constructed?*" Although Laurel Richardson focuses on text, I believe that the concept "writing; a method of inquiry" (2000a) can be extended to visuals and artistic visual production. I have used the artistic medium of photography, the medium I know the best and am most comfortable with to study changes in my life situation, ideals, and self-perception. Most of my ideas are born while photographing, and I can best analyze and understand my behavior when writing in a fictional or poetic form in relationship to my photographs. Only lately have I found writing to be an important expression for self-reflexivity and therapy through the theoretical writing of this artifact. I now write to verbalize my conceptual understanding; I write to further the complexity of embodied and tacit knowledge represented in my photographs. For me, combining and intertwining visuals and writing has "created new ways of writing and reading" (Richardson, 2000b, p. 154). It has changed me, the ways I understand knowledge, the ways I read and write/create visuals and text. I hope that the intensive process of self-reflexive study is apparent through this body of work and the installations of my work, and I further hope that models for using self-reflexive and artistic practices in professional development and diversity education can be found through reading this written-visual artifact.

### **The Structure and Three Main Themes / Aspects of Identity**

My study is constructed of different forms of textual and visual representations. I have allowed myself to imagine. The only thread that I have followed throughout the process has been the desire to enrich my understanding of self as it has been altered through drastic changes while living in a new cultural environment. Different forms of narration have been present the whole time. As the use of English as my main language of communication in private and educational settings was new to me, I started to photograph my own life and write short accounts based on my feelings recalled from the photographs I created. I found an escape from the rules of appropriate academic English and its grammar in the language and format of these stories (further discussed in Chapter 3). Between writing and photography, photographing has been the more consistent activity, while I have found calmness and understanding in these emotional stories. I

could have re-written them from the perspective that time provides, but I have chosen to remain faithful to their original forms in mood and wording. These initial stories are included in this body of work while I have also provided lengthy descriptions of several analytical processes (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

Arts-based educational research and autoethnography both have goals similar to those of art: they aim to touch the reader/viewer, evoke emotions, and provide alternative perspectives in viewing life (i.e. Barone & Eisner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). They both use artistic methods of writing and expressing oneself. This style of writing is most commonly associated with fiction. My study is based on visual images, creative writing, and visual and textual narratives. Arts-based educational research and autoethnography do not have a set of methods or a fixed philosophical/theoretical framework that can characterize these types of study. My study modifies methods from multiple academic disciplines, as well as from art, art criticism, autobiographical writing, and oral and written storytelling traditions. The research process is as much about the emergence of methods and theory as it is my story of immigration and assimilation (or refusal to assimilate?).

My work is theoretically influenced by critical visual sociology (Chaplin, 1994); critical visual ethnography (Pink, 2001); embedded in critical ethnography (i.e. Clifford, 1996) that recognizes the partial nature of all ethnographic knowledge; cultural studies (e.g. Hall, 1997); and interdisciplinary visual culture studies (Mirzoeff, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001) and studies of visual methodologies (Rose, 2001) that have greatly advanced the social, cultural, and political nature of visual knowledge. I have studied visual and textual autobiographies and memoirs as well as theories of autobiographical writing, knowledge construction and individual artists' works. I have also been involved in studying contemporary art theory, and the study of artists' work (especially that of women photographers) whose work is engaged in studying cultural, gendered and situated identity and who have written about their own work. Like other scholars studying the construction of visual knowledge, I argue that the study of art and art theory helps to critically re-evaluate the academic methods of studying identity. I am also, and especially, influenced by feminist works that through questioning the established practices "produce different structures of intelligibility that, in turn, produce different epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 2).

Chapters 2 and 3 form a theoretical framework for understanding the alternative approaches of arts-based research and autoethnography, and the ways I have used photography and different modes of writing in the research process. Chapter 4 then focuses on the gendered identity as it is formed in close relationship to one's family, yet in the complex discourses of culture and society. Writing Chapter 5 would have not been possible without the in-depth study of the themes discussed in the preceding four chapters that created a framework and basis for discussing my understanding of critical visual- and arts-informed pedagogy. In turn, writing Chapter 5 informed my evolving theoretical thinking, as I returned to critically re-evaluate the theories and concepts discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. All these chapters are written in layers, not in the linear order presented here. This format reflects my belief that research, pedagogy, and private life cannot be separated, but inform one another and intertwine.

The form of my dissertation does not follow the dominant and most commonly accepted structure set for academic dissertation research. This structural pattern, I believe, would have worked against my study and what I have learned from it. My dissertation is constructed using varied styles of writing, and combinations of visuals and texts. The different sections might appear to lack coherence; however, every part is constructed in a way that I believe best supports my intentions, and taken together form a whole. I intertwine my photographs with different types of texts forming visual and textual sequences according to the theme. My dissertation is built around three aspects of identity: cultural, gendered, and academic.

The starting point for the critical study of cultural identity was my move to a new country. The first months of my life in this country, culture and educational system, with new professional roles, changed the way I viewed myself; and the following three years made me question all the aspects of life and knowledge I had previously accepted as the basis of my existence. While I knew that hundreds of other graduate students, and also immigrants who have come to foreign countries for reasons other than education, have gone through this life-altering adaptation process in their private and professional lives, I felt that I had jumped into this experience unprepared to face the profound effects this experience would have on my self-perception. I could not pass up the opportunity to research something so important to my emotional and intellectual development.

During the first year in Ohio I was a stranger, an alien, and I experienced the privileges and downfalls of being incognito. The beauty of strangeness lies in the freedom for self-creation, but fears are easily fed by insecurity and a need to become part of the new society and to feel accepted. Quoting Howard Stein (*Culture Change, Symbolic Object Loss. And Restitutional Process*, 1985) Virginia Shabatay (1991) argues that a stranger faces difficulty and struggle in a new cultural and living situation because s/he is still living in part in the old and what was before. My personal stories intertwined with the theoretical texts are often filled with sadness, grief, and struggle. I have searched for acceptance, but I have refused to let the past go completely. The richness of this multicultural experience is that I have lived multiple lives, personalities, and roles at once that may never merge. Yet, multiplicity naturally causes a loss of a united sense of self. The first main “theme” section of the dissertation, the construction of cultural identity, focuses on questioning the learned and adapted cultural identity while building a critical and self-reflexive understanding of the concepts of travel, location-dislocation, belonging and un-belonging, home, nationality, otherness and strangeness (Chapter 3).

The second “theme” section is built around the critical study of self as it is constructed in relationship to one’s past and personal relationships in varied and complex cultural and social discourses (Chapter 4). I understand self and identity through relationality: that is the understanding of self as constructed in relation to one’s surroundings and especially in relationships with other people. Several educators and scholars, especially feminist scholars, (e.g. Eakin, 1999; Witherell & Noddings (Eds.) 1991; Belenky & al., 1986) have written about relationality in the process of identity formation and learning to understand one’s self. It has often been claimed that, women especially form their identities in relationship to the significant people in their lives. I understand identity as in-flux, complex, multiple, relational (Eakin, 1999), communal and simultaneously performed in many stages (Smith, 1998). I believe in the power of narration and storytelling in shaping one’s identity and expanding one’s views about “otherness.” It becomes possible to understand relationality between a person, his/her surroundings, and others through shared stories and life experiences; we “naturally” relate to the story of the narrator, and read our own stories through complex parallel readings of the other. Furthermore, this relational reflexive behavior opens the doors to acceptance, since it is through these personal narratives that we best relate to another person’s

experience and come to question pre-existing assumptions and stereotypes. Thus, personal narrative has to be one of the most influential ways of teaching for educators whose goals are deepening understanding of otherness and more democratic and equal societies (Chapter 3, 4 & 5).

The fifth chapter draws from the previous two main themes through connections found between one's personal life and one's role as an educator and researcher. It performs educational and cultural criticism through a combination of theoretical and autobiographical essay writing (Hesford, 1999). While some narratives relating to my past educational experiences have been included, the focus of this chapter was to arrive at my pedagogical and professional/theoretical positionality. Since my aim as an art educator is to teach diverse and multiple perspectives in viewing life through the arts, critical analysis of visual artifacts, and visual production/communication, I investigated how my personal cultural and gendered identities continuously shape my educational philosophy. Through this research process I have gained an appreciation for my students' stories and come to understand how to help students to investigate their global, national, local and personal cultural identities. Wendy Hesford (1999) calls attention to the participatory role educators play "in the construction of 'other'" (p. xxx). To gain deeper understanding of my participation in constructing and supporting stereotypical "otherness" and ability to promote democracy in my academic practices, I have questioned myself: "What narratives of identity and difference shape [my] authority, and how can [I] use the authority conferred to [me] to challenge and expose [mine and my students'] narratives?" (Hesford, 1999, p. xxx).

### **Words for the Road**

Throughout the process of writing my dissertation, I have felt alone. I have feared bringing the private into public and I have often been afraid that I would not be able to pull this all theoretically together. What has kept me going is my desire to challenge the representational forms that discriminate against visual and silent knowledge, the denial of the personal, and the fact that my academic advisor never asked me to drop the topic. I wish to invite my potential readers into my story which, as unlikely as it may occasionally sound, is about the beauty and excitement of life and fascination with human thought. I also hope to invite my readers to participate in my journey through the lost sense of self, the fruitfulness of experiencing temporary fragmentation of identity, and my growth in questioning the narratives I learned to

live by. It may sound “cheesy” and romanticized to talk about the importance of individual thought and identity construction as a means of providing answers to the intercultural, interethnic, and interpersonal communication difficulties with which we seem to be increasingly struggling. Yet, I believe it is more important now than ever to re-evaluate the methods we use and theories we follow in studying personal and cultural identity. Through my research I wish to call attention to the sociocultural borders we build and live by and within, and to the moments of contradiction at the borders and their eventual or possible rupture.

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide a terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1-2).

I suggest that similar processes of visual and self-reflective inquiry can be adapted to the study of self and other in diversity education at different levels. The process requires willingness to expose one’s self to public scrutiny, which at times hurts. Although I write about myself and the text discusses themes specific to my life, I believe that we can find temporary self-determination through relating to other’s personal narratives. As an educator, I believe that there is a continuous need to re-evaluate methods used in multicultural and diversity education. My critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1994; Hesford, 1999; Dunlop, 1999) is based on an indepth study and understanding of individual learners’ as well as cultural producers’ contextual lives and narratives. Acknowledging the achievements of diversity education thus far, I claim that we need to reconsider the categories that some multicultural and ethnic philosophies of education assume and instead focus on interpersonal communication and critical reflection on a very basic individual level. I am not suggesting that we should abandon categories, but that we need to see beyond gender, ethnic, cultural, sexual, geopolitical, and social classifications, and focus on the complexity of identity construction. We have to be willing to listen, hear and share, take the time and commit to developing further understandings of “otherness,” that which is strange to us, and recognize the “stranger” (Shabatay, 1991) within ourselves that makes interpersonal communication complicated. Pausing and recognizing the uniqueness, strangeness, and sameness of each learner, we can create new grounds for acceptance.

This process has been driven by my need to understand the connections between theories, practice, and private life. My undergraduate and masters education was artistically pronounced and the educational

training emphasized more of the feeling (gut) that a certain educational practice was right, rather than explaining and investigating the theories behind these practices. Through my doctoral education, I have searched for answers and explanations on how to better understand humanity, how to learn and teach increased understanding and critical acceptance of diversity, and how to connect the private self with the theories practiced. I believe this to be possible through self-reflexive practices and a constant search and re-formation of methodologies and research practices that best suit personal and professional intentions.

I believe that it is necessary for art educators to become increasingly involved in research on visual knowledge construction and the various alternative ways visuals can function in research as data, a form of critical knowledge, and text (Pink, 2001).

I have observed fields as varied as anthropology, ethnography, literary studies, art criticism and media studies become increasingly involved in advancing research in visual-based knowledge construction. Researchers from various disciplines have started to acknowledge the demand for people who have the ability and training to both understand the social aspects involved in visual production and consumption, and the practical, ideological and theoretical skills necessary for understanding the processes of image and artifact production. I foresee a greater potential for art educators to participate in this wider discussion about visibility and offer their practical and theoretical knowledge about learning through the visual, bodily, and emotional. My study offers an example of how different theories of thought and representation – such as photography, art criticism, visual culture studies, feminism and ethnography – can be innovatively used to enrich knowledge of visual and human behavior.



## Memory

Memories are treasured, cherished and loved. Memories bond families. Memories are thought to be nice and positive, but they also cause shame and sadness.

I didn't use to know how to construct memories. I didn't seem to remember what was found valuable; instead I remembered what was thought to be odd or irrelevant. I thought I had no memory or my memory was off the track.

I so often felt insane and loss of control when trying to remember how a certain event proceeded linearly. I felt loss of reality after going through an event multiple times, each time, viewing it differently and pronouncing different aspects of a memory. I read it in layers – eventually confusing facts to dreams and wishes. My regrets and needs changed the story in my favor, or made it even worse in case I needed to punish myself for misbehavior.

Photograph 2 ⇒



It took me twenty-some years to question shared memories instead of my thinking. I had to find a different way of representing my past reality.

Images storage memories in a very different manner than verbal memory constructs. No matter what we are told, there is no right or wrong in images. They are the containers of my memories, my needs and dreams. I use them for whatever I need them for. They are my servants and my lords in giving me help and guidance in remembering.

⇐ Photograph 2